

RELIGIOUS HARMONY

By Mr. Teh Thean Choo

In the wake of the new interest in religion manifested in many parts of the world it has been agreed that fundamental to religion is the belief in God – a belief which can be harnessed to serve the goal of social and cultural harmony in a multi-religious society. Each and everyone of us belonging to a particular religious denomination, has our own concept and belief on this intricate subject. In browsing through the dictionary I find the description of God as the self-existing supreme deity, a divinity. This description is popularly accepted by the major religions of the world. Buddhists respect other co-religionists in their religious concepts and beliefs. Buddhism, as a most tolerant religion, enjoins its followers never to belittle the religious beliefs and practices of people of different faith.

Although Buddhism does not subscribe to the general notion of a Creator-God, Buddhism nevertheless

teaches that such gods, deities and devas are divine beings living in certain planes of existence of their own in the universe and that such beings are capable of exercising some form of influence on earthly mortals in their worldly activities. However, Buddhists are not taught to seek any external aid or form of supplication from such gods, deities or devas for their own salvation. In order to seek one's own salvation, Buddhism advocates a process of mental purification, at the spiritual level, through the performance of selfless service and dedication through the individual's efforts in the practice of morality, concentration and wisdom.

In this context, in our multi-religious and multiracial society, our fellow Buddhists, working hand-in-hand with other co-religionists, striving for the peace and harmony of our country, can be in no disagreement whatsoever with the believers of other faiths in the concepts on the subject of 'Belief in God' – It is accepted that such a belief and concept does help to create a spirit of religious awareness that would mould the individual, the society and the community towards a more humane feeling for one another and generating a spirit of tolerance and understanding, thus kindling the torch, not of hatred and discrimination, but of world peace and harmony for all humanity and for all time.

Not in Rivalry but in Unity

All religions exist for the good of mankind. All religions teach and exhort mankind to live and behave as decent

human beings. It is incumbent that all religionists should consider getting together, not in rivalry but in unity, cooperation and understanding to make people realize and appreciate the value of spiritual aspects of life, the value of devotion and the basic principles of religions such as the ideal of truth, justice, dedicated service, charity, loving kindness and goodwill towards mankind. These concepts and principles are universal in character and should be generally acceptable to all religionists.

Freedom of Worship

Although Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, freedom of worship and religious beliefs are enshrined in our country's constitution. We are allowed to be free-thinkers or to follow any religious denomination. We are not compelled to toe any particular line of religious worship or belief. We cherish this freedom. It is to be hoped that this freedom of ours would be maintained and sustained for all time and that it would not be marred or destroyed by the moves of any fanatical religious group or organisation. Fanaticism, in any form or from any quarter, is inimical to peace and harmony in any society.

All of us are perpetually seeking for peace and harmony. We want peace and harmony for our family. We want peace and harmony in society. We do not want inter-religious clashes, nor do we bargain for inter-racial conflicts. We want to live and let live. To achieve these, we should uphold all that is ethical. We should practise

patience, tolerance and understanding. We should befriend one another, helping one another wherever and whenever the need arises. We should discard racial and religious discrimination. Irrespective of race or creed, we should regard one another as brothers and sisters in a happy family and as law-abiding citizens, striving for peace and harmony. This should be the resolve of all co-religionists in a multi-religious society.

Be Considerate

Whilst appreciating the fact that in this country, we are privileged to carry out our respective religious rites and practices without any hindrance, living in a multi-racial and multi-religious society means that we should try to be considerate at all times in whatever we do. We must not forget the feelings of our neighbours who are followers of a different religious denomination and who may not appreciate certain ritualistic performances foreign to them. We must be considerate. We must not be egoistic and think of ourselves and our needs only. Because of a certain special occasion or happening in our home, sad or otherwise, we wish to perform certain religious rites and rituals in accordance with our tradition and cultural background; be fair and considerate by not overdoing things and causing hardship and annoyance to our neighbours. Whatever religious practices are performed they must be done within reasonable limits and within the confines of our homes without causing undue disturbances to the peace and serenity of

our neighbourhood. If we dogmatically insist on the right to perform our rites and rituals, however noisy, cumbersome or irritating to others, without caring for the feelings of our neighbours, we would definitely be courting trouble or particularly in a multi-religious neighbourhood. Consideration for the well-being of others, even under difficult or trying circumstances, is the key to peaceful and harmonious living in a multi-religious society.

Universal Common Ground

Admittedly, we have our differences in our various concepts and beliefs, nevertheless, we have a vast universal common ground – the eradication of evil, the spread of goodwill amongst men, and the search for peace, eternal bliss and salvation. These are common aims of all religions. Many of the intrinsic religious principles enshrined in various religions are also similar in character. To achieve unity, it is necessary that all religionists should shed their cloak of egoism and superiority and deliberate in the spirit of tolerance, patience and mutual understanding. It is our duty to respect the other man's religious belief whatever our religious belief may be: religious tolerance is absolutely essential and necessary for the sake of harmonious and peaceful living.

Essence of Similarities

Instead of castigating and portraying certain religious

differences in a humiliating manner, it would be a wonderful achievement if our religious leaders and all religionists could make a study of all religious beliefs and practices and portray the essence of similarities in all that is good and worthwhile for the common consumption of all religionists. I quote hereunder some shining examples of some similarities.

Buddhism says: “Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.”

The Taoist says: “Regard your neighbour’s gain as your own gain, and your neighbour’s loss as your own loss.”

The Christian says: “All things whatsoever ye would that man should do to you, do you even so to them.”

The Muslim says: “Do unto all men as you would they should do unto you and reject for others what you would reject for yourself.”

The Hindu says: “Let no one do to others what he would not have done to himself.”

Honour the Founders

As Buddhists, we are taught to respect and honour the founders and teachers of other religious denominations and their teachings. It is appreciated that all religious teachers have dedicated their lives for the sake of human welfare and well-being. They deserve respect and honour for their selfless services and devotion for the good of mankind. This is another significant aspect of religious tolerance exemplified by Buddhists. It is our sincere belief that tolerance, particularly religious tolerance, is a virtue that each and everyone of us must inculcate as a way of life. Just as good begets good, respect begets respect and tolerance begets tolerance.

Religious Tolerance

Without tolerance, we will be going back to the law of the jungle where chaos reigns and where might is right. This is not for the good of our society. This is not what our country wants. All of us, irrespective of race or creed, want to live in peace and harmony. We want to co-exist with one another – for the good of one another. Therefore, it is incumbent that we should not only preach tolerance but we should practise tolerance, particularly religious tolerance. We are proud and happy to note that as far as our country is concerned, religious tolerance is being practised and upheld by our religionists to a high degree. Many visitors to our country have noted with pleasant surprise the existence of a Mosque, a Church or a Temple, in close proximity with one another in many

towns in Malaysia with devotees of various religious denominations streaming in and out of their respective places of worship without any interference whatsoever. This is religious tolerance as it is.

The authorities concerned are also actively promoting inter-religious harmony by sponsoring regular meetings of religious leaders of diverse denominations to deliberate on various religious issues for ensuring goodwill and the maintenance of peace and amity in the country.

One False Step

Whilst we are living in peace and harmony, the world today lives in constant fear, suspicion and tension. This is due to the existence of deadly weapons that could cause unimaginable destruction or annihilation within the space of minutes. Brandishing these awful instruments of death, the super powers are threatening and challenging one another, boasting shamelessly that one can cause more destruction and misery in the world than the other. They have travelled along this path of madness to such a point that, now, if one false step is taken in a certain direction, the result will be nothing but mutual annihilation along with the total and complete destruction of humanity.

Intrinsic Religious Principles

Human beings, in fear of the situation they have themselves created, would want to find a way out, and

seek some form of solution. The solution is difficult to find except through religion and the spiritual development of man, harnessing intrinsic religious principles to counter the evil intent of the war-mongers. All the religionists of the world have an important part to play. The role of the various religions must be collaborative and not competitive. The Buddha's message of non-violence and peace, of love and compassion, of tolerance and understanding, of truth and wisdom, of respect and regard for all life, of freedom from selfishness, hatred and violence, delivered well over two thousand five hundred years ago, could be utilised with the basic principles of other co-religionists, to dispel the fear, suspicion and tension prevailing in this world. Seen in whatever light, the Buddha's message cannot be considered as narrow and restrictive but universal in character and application.

Spiritual Re-Armament

Religious harmony and spiritual re-armament should be nurtured as a spiritual force to counter the madness of today's armaments race for the total and complete destruction of humanity. To establish real and lasting peace, it is necessary that ways and means must be found to eliminate the root cause of war. Men and nations must renounce selfish desires, racial arrogance and the egoistic lust for possession and power. Greed, hatred and delusion must be done away with. Materialism alone cannot ensure real happiness. Religion alone can effect

the spiritual change of heart and bring about the disarmament of the mind – this is the real and lasting disarmament.

Youth and Religion

It is noticed that in many parts of the world, many young people are turning away from religion. They maintain that religion is not important for their daily existence and that religion is an unnecessary burden for mankind. They consider that religion hinders a man's thinking power. These young people intoxicated with modern concepts of materialism and modern trends of enjoyment, feel that they can do very well without religion. This is a sad state of affairs, apparently depicting the failure of world religions to guide and influence the young people to a path of spiritual emancipation. It is time that responsible religious leaders and responsible thinking people of the world should get together to ascertain the root causes of the failure of many of our religious missions – causing our young people to stray away from time-honoured religious principles, beliefs and concepts. Efforts must be made to convince and persuade the younger generation to appreciate and realise the important role that religion and religious emancipation can and must play in their daily lives. All religions have one common aim – to be of service to mankind and the spiritual upliftment of humanity. All religions preach goodwill and proclaim the brotherhood of men. These common aims and ideals, for the good of humanity, should transcend whatever

differences that may exist in respect of religious beliefs, concepts and practices. There must be unity in diversity. We must not try to ridicule the man with the mote in his eye, forgetting the beam that is obstructing our own eyes. All religionists should try to seek a common platform and work in unison for the spiritual upliftment of humanity so that religion may contribute to the perfection of human nature and a noble humanity to the perfection of religion. All religionists should stretch out their hands to their fellow religionists with genuine feelings of goodwill, sincere friendship and brotherhood, with respect and reverence for each other and for each other's religions to strive for the achievement of a noble common cause in the spiritual upliftment of the individual for human well-being, justice and peace.

Divine Qualities

“Fundamental to religion is the belief in God.” With profound respect, may I be bold to suggest that apart from the single concept of ‘Belief in God’, fundamental to religion should be the observance and putting into practice of all the intrinsic religious principles enshrined in all religions in our search to find godhead or divine qualities pervading our life, in thought, word and deed.

